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Capstone Research Project

The Intersection of Adolescent Mental Health and Academic Performance:

A Case Study of Ten Urban High School Students

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GRAD 590 A

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Executive Summary

This research paper summarizes the results of a study entitled, *The Intersection of Adolescent Mental Health & Academic Performance*. The purpose for this research was to evaluate the socioemotional well-being vulnerable students and the mental health services available to them within public high school institutions. The idea is to enhance mental health and social-emotional well-being support services for vulnerable students, decreasing interruptive impact on academic performance. Research increasingly points to the link between students' academic success and adolescent social, emotional, and behavioral health. Given that public school systems access large numbers of adolescents, they are most commonly identified as *the* best place to provide services promoting universal mental health for its populations (Colorado Framework for School Behavioral Health Services, 2013).

With an ethnographic approach, the study of people in their own environment through the use of methods such as face-to-face interviewing, and focusing on participant voices, the researcher sought to investigate the following three research questions:

- 1. What mental health support services are available to our most vulnerable public high school students?**
- 2. Who provides mental health services to our most vulnerable public high school students?**
- 3. What theories are currently used to guide practices that address vulnerable public high schools students' mental health and well-being?**

This research is critical in addressing the mental health pandemic faced by America's most vulnerable high school students and its impact on academic achievement. When ignored, education administrators fail to prevent student mental health issues from becoming a barrier to

high school success. To answer these questions, relevant literature was reviewed, along with the data gathered from study participants which allowed for prominent patterns to emerge.

The research revealed that lifestyle, such as familial structure, did indeed, impact student academic performance. It was also discovered that prevention and early intervention initiatives are exercised as current best practice for addressing student social, emotional, and behavioral health. Therefore, because public schools cannot control every aspect of student life, mental health services must be made available *inside* all public high school institutions. School based licensed mental health counselors, expertly trained in adolescent psychology and development, need to become standard school staff in all public high schools in America.

A comprehensive framework that addresses and supports the mental health needs of America's high school student's needs to be implemented immediately. Policies that include behavioral health professionals working together with families and the community to improve prevention, intervention, and early detection strategies, need to be put in place to meet students' social, emotional, and behavioral health needs. Resources for public high school mental health services need to become more of a priority. With this implemented policy, American public high schools will be better positioned to reach greater academic achievements, enhanced reciprocity between students and staff, and an improved school climate and culture.

Introduction

Education of high school students requires more than just providing a teaching and learning space. Education practitioners must acknowledge the adolescent population they are serving. Adolescence is the transitional period between childhood and adulthood. During adolescence, many crucial milestones must be met in order to ensure optimal emotional health, and identity formation (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2014). Education practitioners

also need to connect to students, families and the community to build relationships for successful outcomes. Collaborative efforts by educators, families, community members, including expertly trained counselors, are needed to cultivate a network of care and support that adequately serve student needs.

As high school performance gaps increase and populations becomes more diverse, there lies a need for more multi-disciplined school staff when serving our students (Reardon, 2011). More specifically, in addition to qualified teachers focused on academic learning, licensed school adjustment counselors, social workers and psychologists are an equally important resource for supporting high school student mental health and emotional well-being. Adolescence can be a trying time for students as it is a period of newness and growth. Healthy progress towards the milestones of adolescence is essential for academic and personal success and well-being. As puberty begins and identity is explored, independence and responsibilities increase, social circles shift and relationships change, all these combined adjustments create pressure and anxiety which is processed differently by each student. The natural development of adolescence coupled with with a vulnerable student population indicates a need for the providing proper additional supports. Combining the presence of mental health professionals within the school, alongside educators, and with the efforts of parents and the entire community together, will maximize student academic success and provide the best high school experience for students during this phase of their life.

In 2009, approximately 25 out of every 100 students in America dropped out of high school before graduating (Freudenberg, 2007). Nearly one-third of all students in the United States, and half of black, Latino, and American Indian students, did not graduate from high school on-time (Stillwell, Sable, & Plotts, 2011). From 2003 through 2008, an average of 10,000

Massachusetts high school students dropped out of school annually (Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2014). At the school where this study will take place the dropout rate as of 2013 was 5.8%. However, Massachusetts does fair better than most states with 5,746 out of 287,478, or 2 percent of students in grades 9 through 12 dropping out of school during the 2013-14 school year. Constructively, this is the lowest rate in ten years (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2015).

The questions are, why, and what are we doing about it. Are public school education practitioners doing everything they can to best support our most vulnerable population of high school students to graduation completion? Dropping out of high school increases the likelihood of living in poverty. Together, living in poverty and not having a high school diploma, these two risk factors are associated with financial and health care struggles, and an overall decrease in quality of life (Edwards, 2007). Adversely, obtaining higher education thereafter, increases quality of life individually and societally. Prevention and intervention practices are needed to avert our most vulnerable students from failing, along with an investigation of what barriers are preventing our high schoolers from academic success.

Many terms are used to refer to this population of youth. They are often labeled as vulnerable, disengaged, disinterested, underprivileged, marginalized, troubled, at-risk, high needs, opportunity challenged, and even delinquent. According to Valerie Richardson, the term, “at-risk,” is used to describe a student that requires temporary or ongoing intervention in order to succeed academically (Richardson, 2008). “There is no consistent definition of at-risk”; the term is highly debated and carries a strong intuitive meaning (Moore, 2006). Whichever label is attached to this population of students will dictate how their needs are addressed. Societal, structural, systemic, and institutional stereotypes only create misconceptions that deviate

practitioners from properly and adequately acknowledging and addressing student needs. How a problem is defined and categorized primarily determines the policies written by legislature to resolve it, often leaving practitioners with few options (Zeldin, 2004; Moore, 2006). Throughout this paper the preferred term used to refer to this student population will be, 'vulnerable'.

Resiliency is another term used to describe students who are somehow able to navigate through adverse circumstances that contribute to their vulnerability. Resiliency is a crucial trait for vulnerable students to develop, as it allows for an adaptive response to adversity. Some identifiable characteristics of vulnerable high school students include: socio-emotional or behavioral issues, absenteeism, low academic performance, disengagement or disinterest in academics, and displaying a disconnection from the school environment (Richardson, 2008). High school students considered vulnerable may also face social and economic barriers to academic progress. Not having the resources to purchase learning tools such as computers, books, or calculators can deter learning. Adolescents, particularly those from low-income households, often carry a unique set of needs and vulnerabilities in a number of areas, including mental health, sexual and reproductive health, substance use, violence and risk-taking behaviors, and nutrition and obesity (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2014).

Other adverse circumstances of vulnerable students that can impede academics as a priority are exposure to an environment of abuse, neglect, or poverty, having minority status, being an English language learner, having low levels of parental engagement, divorced parents, single parent households, mental illness, substance use, criminal history, and teen pregnancy (Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2009). All of these potential circumstances create student vulnerability which contributes to having mental health or emotional instability. Having to navigate expected challenges during high school, such as puberty

and adolescent development, presents enough of a challenge for students without having to endure other adversities. When compound adverse circumstances are added to natural challenges, this reality increases student vulnerability against the successful completion of high school. Having the support of specially trained mental health professionals, such as adjustment counselors or social workers directly inside the high school to help minimize student vulnerabilities, could help build personal and academic resilience.

To diminish student vulnerability and increase academic achievement, the underlying issues need to be acknowledged and addressed. School staff cannot just respond to the surface behaviors and expect to rectify the problem. For example, punishing a disengaged student with detention for not doing their homework is not going to motivate that student to do homework, especially if they are mentally preoccupied or feeling overwhelmed by deeper issues occurring outside of school. Another example is when a high school student is suspended or expelled, there is a significant increase in the likelihood they will become involved in the juvenile justice system, which clearly does not help the situation (Fabelo, Thompson, Plotkin, Carmichael, Marchbanks, & Booth, 2011). All high school staff and faculty should be conscious of student behaviors that indicate when a referral to a mental health practitioner is needed.

Many struggling high school students need support beyond academics and classroom learning. Professional staff need to confront the deeper explanation for problem behavior. Problems at home or outside of school may not go away, but identifying the best way to support our students can help develop their resiliency and influence their priorities (Edwards, Mumford, & Roldan, 2007). With appropriate support systems, academic achievement should be attainable for all students. My desire is for vulnerable high school students to utilize education as an opportunity to transform their label of “vulnerable” to one of success. My objective is to help

vulnerable high school students feel empowered by building their self-esteem, self-confidence, and an internal sense of responsibility to recognize that persistence will persevere (Santrock, 2014).

It is the promise of the United States government's public school system to ensure students are receiving the support needed to obtain a high school diploma. "Equal access to a free, public school education from primary through secondary school is a right of all children in the United States" (The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2015). The quality of free education in urban areas is also a concern as we know that all public education is not equal. High schools need to be better prepared to serve all students in navigating through their difficulties, academic or otherwise. Each vulnerable student faces different challenges and has a different learning style. Thus, the education administered should be responsive to the individual needs of each student.

In order for vulnerable high school students to gain financial independence, stability, and security and to obtain a greater quality of life after high school, a diploma is a minimum necessity. Five reasons for getting a high school diploma are: 1. Career opportunities, 2. Furthering your education, 3. Higher salary, 4. Staying employed, 5. More overall opportunities such as home ownership (Work at Home Jobs, 2014). Fortunately, most schools and local community organizations provide support services to students with these vulnerabilities (Corrin, Parise, Cerna, Haider, & Somers, 2015). Social services such as offsite counseling, intervention and prevention programs are available however, access to such off-site locations may eliminate access to these social services for many students. Another missing resource in many Massachusetts public high school institutions is on-site adjustment counselors or social workers. School adjustment counselors are responsible for the promotion of cognitive, social, emotional,

behavioral and personal development of students. By placing school adjustment counselors or social workers inside all high schools, such intervention and prevention services would be readily available and accessible to all students.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify the best mental health and education practices for supporting vulnerable public high school students through their high school career. Moreover, this study will be used to identify, establish and enhance effective educational prevention and intervention strategies and encourage the implementation of school mental health adjustment counselors and social workers. This study will consider the cultural, psychosocial and emotional wellbeing of students, their families and their current environment. Through the use of participatory action research, this study will take place at a local public high school to identify structural inadequacies within the school system as well as barriers and recommend action for providing adequate mental health services.

Rationale

This investigation will evaluate whether current practices are effectively serving vulnerable public high school student populations beyond academics only. It is important for practitioners to maintain current knowledge of the best practices in their field for meeting the needs of the population they serve, and to also retrieve feedback from students on whether they feel they are being well served. The needs of vulnerable public high school student populations are rising, therefore professional training needs to adapt and evolve to meet these emergent demands (Howard, 2007). This is especially important as the United States student population becomes increasingly diverse in class, race, gender, culture, and language (Howard, 2007). Current efforts may be working in part, but are not entirely addressing all the needs of our

changing population. Therefore, a growing gap exists and increasing amounts of students continue to fail and drop out of high school (Howard, 2007). How much are diversifying demands really changing United States educational policies? Is the United States government finally acknowledging our shifting demographics or is the United States still maintaining the conventional “boot straps” strategy of equal opportunity? Are we acknowledging the systems that create such social inequality for our vulnerable students? To dissolve these problems practitioners in education need to provide equitable service to all students. The job is to individually empower each and every of student.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1. What mental health support services are available to our most vulnerable public high school students?**
- 2. Who provides mental health services to our most vulnerable public high school students?**
- 3. What theories are currently being used to guide practices that address vulnerable public high schools students’ mental health and well-being?**

Significance

This study will be significant for students, parents, local public school districts, educators, practitioners, and other members of the community that are contributing to the education of our vulnerable P9-12 student populations. A current and thorough investigation of vulnerable student needs that also evaluates services provided will inform students, parents, schools, and communities whether existing practices are the most effective or if there are more effective, yet absent alternatives.

Definition of Terms

1. Achievement gap-The difference in the performance between each ESEA subgroup within a participating LEA or school and the statewide average performance of the LEA's or State's highest achieving subgroups in reading/language arts and mathematics as measured by the assessments required under the ESEA.
 2. Adolescence- the period following the onset of puberty during which a young person develops from a child into an adult.
 3. At-risk student- a student who requires temporary or ongoing intervention in order to succeed academically and obtain a high school diploma.
 4. Behavioral issues-troublesome, risk taking, or disruptive behavior that is more extreme than occasional errors in judgment and requires professional intervention to avoid legal difficulties. i.e.; Delinquency, drug use, academic failure, risky sexual behavior, violence, property damage, vandalism and disregard for the rights of others.
 5. Delinquent-typically of a young person or that person's behavior showing or characterized by a tendency to commit crime, particularly minor crime.
 6. Economic Barriers- poverty, general scarcity, dearth, or the state of one who lacks a certain amount of material possessions or money.
 7. Educators- All education professionals and paraprofessionals working in participating schools including principals or other heads of a school, teachers, other professional instructional staff (e.g. staff involved in curriculum development, staff development, or operating library, media and computer centers), pupil support services staff (e.g. guidance counselors, nurses, speech pathologists, etc.), other administrators (e.g. assistant principals, discipline specialists.), and paraprofessionals (e.g. assistant teachers, instructional aides).
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8. High-needs students- Students at risk of educational failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, such as students who are living in poverty, who attend high-minority schools (as defined in the Race to the Top application), who are far below grade level, who have left school before receiving a regular high school diploma, who are at risk of not graduating with a diploma on time, who are homeless, who are in foster care, who have been incarcerated, who have disabilities, or who are English learners.
 9. Interventions-strategies, programs, frameworks, and methods that seek to avert obstacles.
 10. Participatory action research-(PAR) is an approach to research in communities that emphasizes participation and action. It seeks to understand the world by trying to change it, collaboratively and following reflection. PAR emphasizes collective inquiry and experimentation grounded in experience and social history.
 11. Prevention-to keep something from happening, i.e. dropout prevention.
 12. Risk Assessments-a systematic process of evaluating the potential risks that may be involved in a projected activity or undertaking.
 13. School Adjustment Counselor- professional staff responsible for the promotion of cognitive, social, emotional, behavioral and personal development of students.
 14. Socioemotional- process that consists of variations that occur in an individual's personality, emotions, and relationships with others during one's lifetime (Santrock, 2014).
 15. Social Barriers-obstructions to entry which are created by the culture of the community, i.e. people's behavior towards newcomers or others in general.
 16. Vulnerable Student-students in need of special care, support, or protection because of age, disability, or risk of abuse or neglect.
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Review of the Literature

The following literature review is a compilation of the research done on the intersection of vulnerable public high school student's psychosocial and emotional wellbeing and their academic performance. Despite the best efforts of professional educators and years of research backed intervention and prevention programs, identifying the best practices for supporting vulnerable students and how to successfully engage them remains a challenge. Educators must acknowledge increasing social and cultural shifts in our demographics, socioeconomics, and languages, while at the same time respecting the boundaries of families. Here, the role of teacher can become varied and collaborating with a qualified school adjustment counselor or social worker would be most appropriate.

There is a growing interest in defining the characteristics of psychosocial services that are most effective in improving the outcomes for vulnerable youth who are exposed to individual, family, and contextual risks such as abuse, neglect, educational disengagement, mental illness, substance abuse, and neighborhood crime (Berzin, 2010). Successful education of vulnerable high school students is the result of cross collaboration with other fields of practice working together as a team utilizing best practices. The concern is that vulnerable high school students are not receiving adequate supplemental services needed beyond their academic teachings in supporting them to successfully graduate high school. This literature review looks to identify the best strategies for educating our most vulnerable population of high school students by responding to the following questions:

- **What mental health support services are available to our most vulnerable public high school students?**
-

- **Who provides mental health services to our most vulnerable public high school students?**
- **What theories are currently used to guide practices that address vulnerable public high schools students' mental health and well-being?**

Understanding the limitations of teachers working to educate students, and the deeper complexity of vulnerable students underscores the need for educators, school administrators, communities, and families to urge policymakers to change current systems and enact more cross collaboration between the professional disciplines allowing for a team of professionals to address high school student needs. Teachers state that the biggest obstacle to student achievement and to their own ability to teach, is student emotional and behavioral problems (Desrochers, 2014).

What mental health support services are available to vulnerable public high school students?

Building an understanding of the adversity confronted by vulnerable youth outside of school, and what configuration of supports can best assist students to thrive academically is the first step for moving past the risks. Existing intervention and prevention programs, such as services provided to vulnerable high school students, were explored. The literature shows vast consensus that simply being in school and staying in school is the best intervention and prevention strategy for decreasing student risk, and it takes a combination of systematic efforts at the community, school, and individual student levels to decrease student risk (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015).

Government reaction to this problem forced the Bush Administration to enact the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, developed to improve the educational outcomes of students considered at-risk for school failure (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Unfortunately, the

No Child Left Behind Act concentrated primarily on academic interventions from the teaching perspective, not from a student learning perspective, and without consideration for social and emotional impacts on learning (Nieto, 2010). School-based mental health programs that task staff teams with a wide range of responsibilities in a comprehensive plan, and include community input and support, reduce behavior problems, improve school climate, and increase academic achievement (Desrochers, 2014). According to Desrochers, the time is far overdue that we acknowledge student emotional and behavioral performance as a part of student academic performance and not separate from (Desrochers, 2014). Current statistics from the National Alliance on Mental Illness are that twenty percent of youth ages 13-18 live with a mental health condition, 11 percent of youth have a mood disorder, 10 percent of youth have a behavior or conduct disorder, 8 percent of youth have an anxiety disorder, and approximately fifty percent of students age 14 and older with a mental illness drop out of high school (NAMI, 2015). Clearly there is a need for public schools to acknowledge the mental health of adolescents attending our schools and to provide them with professional support they require. High school is not an either or situation where it is sufficient to provide academics only.

One of the first intervention concepts was the introduction of the after school program. The after school program was originally introduced as a space for students to receive further supervised academic and social enrichment. Due to economic and demographic shifts in the 1970s, after school care shifted from the responsibility of family and community members to facilities with managed programs (Bowen & Dodd, 2011). The formalized after school program concept was a direct result of the increase in divorce rate, single parent homes, and dual career couples (Bowen & Dodd, 2011). From 1987 through 1999, public after school programs have tripled from 13 percent to 47 percent (Bowen & Dodd, 2011). Today, according to the

Afterschool Alliance, more than 6 million children and youth participate in after school programs (Bowen & Dodd, 2011). Many of these programs are non-profit, not for profit, and entirely volunteer operated with no budget.

In Dodd and Bowens' 2011 research report, one after school program in New York run by a non-profit community action group hypothesized that this intervention program, offering to further develop academic and social skills of students, would reduce barriers, improve after school experiences, and academic performance of vulnerable students (Bowen & Dodd, 2011). The literature also acknowledges that other factors, such as family dynamics, home environments, access to resources, and intellectual or mental health challenges may affect student ability to learn and succeed (Bowen & Dodd, 2011; Desrochers, 2014). School is not the original or primary source of learning. Realistically, learning begins at home. Recognizing the significant role of family is a key part of student academic achievement (Bowen & Dodd, 2011). To measure the success of this program, assessments of the relationships between parents, teachers, and students was made along with reevaluation of academic performance of students. Through survey methods, improvements in students' performance relating to attendance, academic work, discipline and social behaviors were reported (Bowen & Dodd, 2011).

Another approach is in-school intervention programs. In a study done in 2013 funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, researchers examined the implementation of a universal systems-level intervention strategy called *school wide positive behavior support* (SWPBS). SWPBS is an asset based model used with the intention to prevent the occurrence of problem behavior at school and increase academic competence of students (Flannery, Frank, Kato, Doren, & Fenning, 2013). The study examined 8 high schools serving more than 15,525 students over 3 years. Through the use of SET measures (school wide

evaluation tool), their findings in improvements were evident between baseline and the end of year one. However, implementation of the new practices proved most challenging and took over 2 years at some high schools due to unwillingness to change.

By utilizing the SWPBS structure, the goal was to establish the behavioral supports and social culture needed to improve the social and academic behavior of all high school students (Flannery et al., 2013). Core practices at the universal level include: “(1) defining and teaching expectations; (2) acknowledging and reinforcing appropriate social and academic behavior; (3) adopting consistent and effective consequences for misbehavior; and (4) integrating behavioral and academic practices to improve learning.” However, for many students, *universal* support is not sufficient. For this reason, schools also adopt a continuum of targeted and intensive intervention options with more individualized support. *Targeted* interventions offer study skills groups, social skills groups and dropout prevention programs. The more *intensive* intervention programs offer individualized behavior support plans and wrap around services (Simonsen, Meyers, & Briere, 2010). Due to the intense amount of time prescribed by these services, schools strive for full implementation of universal and targeted supports first so that less than five percent of students need intensive services (Flannery et al., 2013).

A growing body of research has demonstrated that SWPBS is effective at reducing the overall occurrence of problem behavior and has made a positive impact on academic skills (Flannery et al., 2013). Some in-school interventions typically center on training in decision making, impulse control, and anger management, and may include intensive family counseling and sustained home visiting programming (Zeldin, 2004). Unfortunately, the majority of empirical research has been tested at the elementary and middle school level. Enforcing a universal systems plan at the high school level is more difficult than at elementary and middle

school because of the much larger number of students and diverse levels of development, culture, languages, and socio-economic status. An expanded scope of measurement on the effectiveness of SWPBS at the high school level is needed for a full comprehension of evidence. However, recent estimates suggest approximately 2,403 high schools, or 12.6 percent are actively implementing SWPBS (Horner, 2013).

Because secondary school students are more developmentally advanced than primary school students, it is common to find that high school faculty is less likely to view behavior reinforcement as their responsibility (Flannery et al., 2013). Students are typically expected to have learned acceptable and appropriate social behavior and self-management skills prior to arriving at high school (Flannery et al., 2013). There is a tremendous need for faculty cooperation for the SWBPS approach to work. One way to achieve faculty cooperation may be to provide professional development education specifically on student psychosocial and emotional states and its impact on academic performance. Partnering students and school adjustment counselors, social workers and psychologists in creating a bridge of communication between faculty and students could also become part of the solution. School psychologists, adjustment counselors, and school social workers are well-positioned to collaborate with teachers and other educators to play vital roles in implementing a proactive model to support vulnerable students (Edwards et al., 2007). The most sensible solution is to dramatically improve the prevention and mental health promotion programs delivered to students along with academic support services (Desrochers, 2014).

This approach to servicing vulnerable high school students through mental health prevention and intervention programs should be led by mental health practitioners, not academically focused educators. These programs are designed to improve students' cognitive

health through increased mindfulness, such as self-awareness skills and how to identify strengths and weaknesses; self-management and responsible decision making; empathy, teamwork, and conflict resolution; and emotional and behavioral self-control through meditation, and physical activities (Desrochers, 2014). The goal of these programs is to teach students how to cope with anxiety, adversity, how to solve problems, and communicate feelings (Desrochers, 2014). These programs typically focus on building resilience within students. Other interventions supporting student social and emotional well-being include staff development and parent education, improving home-school collaboration, and school wide efforts to improve school climate (Desrochers, 2014). Screening for emotional and behavioral problems is considered best practice and expected by all schools. The most common screening process is the response-to-intervention (RTI) framework (Desrochers, 2014).

Who provides mental health services to our most vulnerable high school students?

Multiple studies concur with the need for interdisciplinary interventions when serving vulnerable high school students, suggesting that public schools, social services, and law enforcement professionals work together as part of one community, as opposed to independently of each other in separate silos, to offer the best support services (Corrin, Parise, Cerna, Haider, & Somers, 2015; Desrochers, 2014; Haight, Bidwell, Marshall, & Khatiwoda, 2014; Sanders & Munford, 2014; Ungar, 2005). An interdisciplinary approach is the use and integration of methods and analytical frameworks from more than one academic discipline to examine an issue (Carlton College, 2012). Most of the literature refers to the interdisciplinary approach, as cross-systems collaboration, describing each system working alongside one another to combine their expertise in offering services for those in need. This requires various partnerships across multiple service systems to attend to the needs of our most vulnerable youth who face significant risk

factors. Cross-system collaboration enhances the strengths of partners to promote a cohesive system of services for youth and families (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2013). Schools with well-developed programs of academic, emotional, and behavioral support, especially those embedded in an interdisciplinary approach of support, demonstrate the best outcomes for vulnerable students (Desrochers, 2014).

In recent years, attention has increasingly focused upon understanding the ways in which interventions offered by multiple service systems combine to have an impact on outcomes for vulnerable students (Sanders & Munford, 2014). In fact, young people who face the most risk as they move through adolescence are typically clients of more than one service system (Sanders & Munford, 2014). Involvement in multiple service systems can provide numerous supports available for vulnerable students, helping to reduce risks and enhance capacity to make better choices (Sanders & Munford, 2014). Teacher referrals are the first and best option for identifying student conduct or behavioral issues. However, these are not adequate for finding students with less obvious mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression. Here, a referral to a trained mental health professional such as a school adjustment counselor, social-worker, or psychologist would be the appropriate specialist in identifying the student's issue. However, both teachers' and mental health professionals' expertise are needed to holistically support students in achieving academic success.

Some disadvantages are that not all intervention and prevention programs can accommodate all students. Each student is best served when treated as an individual, however, lack of qualified staff and resources can leave the most vulnerable students without support. Parent workshops are often a great idea offering education on many topics from parenting to English lessons, but are often held during working hours. One area of major concern is parental

engagement is critical to student success and scheduling is often a conflict. Also, teachers are resistant to change. When implementing new practices, even when proven successful in research, staff are reluctant to change. This statement is not just reflective of teachers; it is true for all employees that are comfortable with routine. For students that are clients of multiple service systems, unfortunately, having an array of providers can result in fragmented or inconsistent service delivery, redundancies, and gaps, which can limit the quality of these services being provided (Corrin, Parise, Cerna, Haider, & Somers, 2015). Use of the cross-system collaboration model within the school can eliminate redundancy and provide better quality support overall for students.

There are stereotypical misconceptions that vulnerable adolescents are labeled with, and these misconceptions can prevent adults from providing opportunities for students to become successful. As stated by Zeldin, and based on G. Stanley Hall's 20th century philosophy of adolescents, "youth policy in the United States reflects the public assumption that adolescence is a time of storm and stress and that youth are therefore in need of protection and control from their communities" (Zeldin, 2004). Objectives and expectations of adults must be observably noticeable by students (Edwards et al., 2007). Adults need to provide students with model behavior, lead by example and give students a chance. Policies are far overdue for updates to reflect our current adolescent population in the present world not that of which existed one hundred years ago.

Heinze, Sanders and Munford assert that positive relationships are a critical dimension of adolescent development (Heinze, 2012; Sanders & Munford, 2014). When young people have mutually beneficial relationships with the people and institutions in their social world they will thrive and contribute (Heinze, 2013). Relationships with school counselors can open up new

networks and provide opportunities for emotional connection and attachment (Sanders & Munford, 2014). These relationships are also likely to influence resilience processes – those relational and personal resources youth can draw on as they cope with adversity, stress and challenge (Sanders et al., 2015). Positive and influential relationships with vulnerable adolescents can develop with any mentoring adult that has the students’ best interests at heart. Such a mentor can be a coach, a volunteer, a family friend, a teacher, principal, community leader, or a school counselor. Students who have parents or other significant adults who show desire for the student’s success, attempt to understand student perspectives, consistently inform students that they are valued, and communicate with students about their own difficulties in life are less likely to engage in destructive behavior (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005). Open lines of communication with significant adults in the students’ lives is a developmental asset associated with students who make responsible choices (Edwards et al., 2007).

School psychologists, social workers, and adjustment counselors are in the greatest position to work alongside teachers to provide vital roles in embracing an interdisciplinary approach to educating vulnerable high school students (Edwards et al., 2007). Through the comprehensive and varied training offered by the collaboration of professionals, the likelihood of student academic success is increased. The positive youth development model puts the academic responsibility in the hands of the student as well as various combinations of parents, teachers, school psychologists, other professional school staff and the students’ community (Edwards et al., 2007).

What theories influence practices that address vulnerable students’ mental health?

This ecological approach seems particularly relevant for school psychologists who emphasize prevention and early intervention models (Edwards et al., 2007). Reframing school

psychology practice as a means of providing systematic prevention services to all students is a meaningful method for building a framework that encourages engagement and collaboration among the various systems involved in each student's life. This reframing approach motivates parents, educators and community members to combine their developmental resources in a consistent, long-term manner to enhance student academic outcomes. The student's teachers, school counselors, and parents should articulate a consensus of objectives and expectations to the students (Edwards et al., 2007).

An immense amount of literature focuses on Positive Youth Development (PYD) as an approach to support vulnerable youth. The traditional, negative perspective of first identifying deficits and pathology before offering aid drastically contrasts with resiliency research and the emerging positive youth development model (Edwards, Mumford, & Roldan, 2007). The PYD perspective is a strength-based concept of adolescence (Lerner, Almeriji, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). PYD evolved from Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which provides a framework from which community psychologists study the relationships with individuals' contexts within communities and the wider society (Santrock, 2015). Martin Seligman has been an avid promoter within the scientific community for the field of positive psychology and has also been a major force behind the concept of PYD.

Positive youth development theory and practice is increasingly shaping the adolescent research, policy, and practice agenda (Sanders & Minford, 2014). According to Lerner, "PYD has redefined adolescence so that rather than being seen as broken, in need of psychological repair, or as problems to be managed all youth are seen as resources to be developed" (Sanders, Mumford, Anwar, Liebenberg, & Unger, 2015). However, outdated youth policy in the United States reflects the public assumption that adolescence is a time of storm and stress, and that

youth are therefore in need of protection and control from their communities (Zeldin, 2004).

Evidence suggests that positive gains can be made with vulnerable youth when a PYD approach guides practice (Sanders et al., 2015). The focus on growth and development, of PYD, is a valuable characteristic of practice with vulnerable students because it emphasizes that change is achievable, even for those who confront significant adversity (Sanders et al., 2015). Key components of PYD programs include the encouragement of personal agency in youth, respectful approaches to youth and their families, and a focus on young people's strengths and competencies alongside the risks and challenges they may confront (Sanders et al., 2015). In an article titled, "Preventing Youth Violence Through the Promotion of Community Engagement and Membership" Shepherd Zeldin explores engagement of youth in community decision making as a public response to violence allowing for them to be contributing citizens on the issues in their community (Zeldin, 2004). A broad body of research indicates that youth engagement reduces the likelihood of delinquency, while concurrently promoting community membership and the development of positive youth competencies and emotional wellbeing (Zeldin, 2004).

Creating agency for youth and including them in decision making provides a needed sense of autonomy, self-efficacy, empowerment, identity development, belonging, and connectedness (Zeldin, 2004). The goal of the PYD approach with vulnerable students is to provide youth with developmental opportunities and supports. There are consistent data indicating that students who feel rejected by their teachers or socially isolated from the school community are more likely to drop out of school and engage in delinquency and drug use (Zeldin, 2004). This research consistently indicates that young people with a stronger sense of connectedness with school and family show significantly lower rates of emotional distress,

violent behavior, and substance use (Zeldin, 2004). When teachers engage students in shared inquiry, construction of knowledge, and service learning, there are often positive developmental outcomes (Zeldin, 2004).

These experiences produce legitimate opportunities for self-directed and challenging learning and allow for a sense of membership and emotional support from non-familial adults. When provided these opportunities for developmental growth, students are more likely to achieve positive outcomes, such as school success and emotional stability, and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as delinquency (Zeldin, 2004). Becoming engaged in one's community may also provide encouraging relationships to students that may be lacking from home, in turn, helping to build resiliency. If society expects students to become successful contributing citizens, nurturing their development is critical.

A study conducted in 2015 examined whether or not services that adopt PYD approaches are related to improved outcomes and resilience for vulnerable youth (Sanders, Munford, Anwar, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2015). The sample included: 605 clients of child welfare, juvenile justice, special education, and mental health systems aged 12 – 17 years. Data was collected via a self-report questionnaire administered by research staff with youth clients. The combination of Pathways to Resilience Youth Measure (PRYM) and Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) were utilized for analysis. The study concluded that “data from vulnerable young people who experience multiple concurrent service system involvement suggests that better quality services, rather than more services, make the most difference to risk reduction, resilience enhancement and improved wellbeing outcomes” (Sanders et al., 2015). The findings from this study constitute that the quality of interactions professionals have with vulnerable youth do make an important difference (Sanders et al., 2015). In particular, “professional practices that provide

spaces for youth engagement and decision-making and that work in respectful ways taking into account youth circumstances bring benefits in terms of enhanced resilience and improves youth wellbeing outcomes” (Sanders et al., 2015). Because vulnerable youth do not typically sign up for extracurricular activities or community programs on their own, aggressive outreach is necessary, and when connections are made, program staff need to quickly and thoughtfully move to integrate youth into decision-making roles consistent with their interests and abilities, creating leadership opportunities (Zeldin, 2004).

Erik Erikson’s psychosocial stage theory is another popular perspective often referred to by practitioners working with adolescents. Erikson was an ego psychologist. He emphasized the role of culture and society and the conflicts that can take place within the ego itself (McLeod, 2013). According to Erikson, the ego develops as it successfully resolves crises that are distinctly social in nature. These involve establishing a sense of trust in others, developing a sense of identity in society, and helping the next generation prepare for the future (Erikson, 1968). Erikson emphasized the adolescent period, feeling it was a critical stage in identity development. Erikson assumes that a crisis occurs at each stage of development. For Erikson, these crises are of a psychosocial nature because they involve psychological needs of the individual (psycho) conflicting with the needs of society (social) (Erikson, 1968). According to Erikson’s psychosocial stage theory, successful completion of each stage results in a healthy personality and the acquisition of basic virtues.

In Erikson’s theory, adolescence is most important. In the process of transitioning into adulthood, children are becoming more independent, and begin to look at the future in terms of career, relationships, families, and residence. The individual wants to belong to a society and fit in. Here exists a major stage in development where the child has to learn the roles one will

occupy as an adult. It is during this stage that the adolescents will re-examine their identity, explore the self, and try to figure out who they are (Myers, 2013). During adolescence, youth explore possibilities and begin to form their own identity based upon the outcome of their explorations (McLeod, 2013).

Failure to establish a sense of identity within society, for example, "I don't know what I want to be when I grow up," or questioning oneself, can lead to role confusion. Erikson believes, that if parents allow children to explore, they will achieve their own identity. However, if the parents constantly push children to conform to their views, the teen will face identity confusion (Schulz & Schulz, 2013). Role confusion involves the individual not being sure about themselves or their place in society (Myers, 2013). In response to role confusion, or what Erikson famously coined as "identity crisis," an adolescent may begin to experiment with different lifestyles (work, school, music, sports, fashion, or political views). Ego identity enables each person to have a sense of individuality. Adolescents, therefore, form their self-image and endure the task of resolving the crisis of their basic ego identity. Successful resolution of the crisis depends on one's progress through previous developmental stages, centering on issues such as trust, autonomy, and initiative (Schulz & Schulz, 2013).

As a contribution to the literature, this study aims to identify whether or not students at a local urban high school are receiving the best academic and psychosocial support services needed to obtain academic success. By obtaining first-hand accounts from students and from staff on whether or not current best practices or services offered are working and comparing their responses with previous studies, the goal was to discover potentially new and better strategies for serving students. High school students must overcome adversity on a daily basis, often in situations that are completely out of their control. It is imperative that adults in a position to do

so provide adolescents with the support necessary to accomplish their goals. Being proactive by focusing efforts on keeping education at the forefront of vulnerable youth is critical to their future success in adulthood. By integrating mental health support services in tandem with educational services, professionals can enhance the opportunity for students to transform their vulnerability into a secure and stable future.

Research Methods

Paradigm

This research project is a qualitative study with a focus on community-based participatory action research (CBPAR). CBPAR is a collaborative research approach that equitably involves community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process and in which all partners contribute expertise and share decision making and ownership (Israel, Schulz, Parker, Becker, Allen, & Guzman, 2008). The goal of CPAR is to produce research that is relevant to the life circumstances of communities and the people who reside within them.

In this research project, the students of a local urban high school were the focus of study (Hacker, 2013). CBPAR has enhanced the effectiveness of interventions by integrating culturally based evidence and internal validity. Youth participatory action research will also be incorporated where appropriate. YPAR is characterized as efforts that are conducted by students within or outside the classroom, with the goal of affecting or informing the school of issues and problems, and in the process contributing to the positive development of a variety of academic, social, and civic skills of participating students (Hacker, 2013).

The objective was to identify the most effective practices for keeping vulnerable high school students academically engaged by taking on the position of the student and listening

intently to their responses to thirteen interview questions. This study approached the research questions under the humanistic or interpretive paradigm. This paradigm aims to understand other cultures from the inside. The primary research tools of observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups were used for data collection. These tools provided rich sources of perceptual data that reflected the students' point of view on impact and allowed for triangulation of data in order to better understand the situation and plan for future interventions (Hacker, 2013).

The epistemology of this paradigm is intersubjective knowledge construction produced through the prolonged process of interaction undertaken by ethnographers who immerse themselves within the culture they are studying (Taylor & Medina, 2014). Using ethnographic case study methods of informal interviewing, participant observation, and establishing culturally sound relationships, interpretive researchers construct trustworthy and authentic accounts of the cultural other (Taylor & Medina, 2014). When applied to educational research, this paradigm enables researchers to build rich local understandings of the life-world experiences of teachers and students and of the cultures of the classrooms, schools and communities they serve (Taylor & Medina, 2014).

Research Design

Based on qualitative research design this study relied on semi-structured interviews and discussions between the researcher and participants for evaluation of this high schools approach to vulnerable student's mental health needs. A prosocial humanistic approach allowed for deep reflection of student perspectives, and empathetic observation from the researcher. Via student interviews, the researcher evaluated whether existing mental health and emotional well-being support services are most effective or if improvements could be made. This was a form of evaluation research, which is considered the "systematic collection of information about

activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs” (Hacker, 2013). The overall design of this study relied on reflective responses from participants to researcher to create stronger support for vulnerable students with the goal of increasing academic performance.

As the researcher, I chose this topic because I am passionate about working with adolescents that are struggling in school because of personal circumstances that are out of their control. I feel obligated to offer these students an alternative approach to navigating through whatever challenges may be preventing them reaching their highest academic potential. I feel this obligation because I believe that obtaining an education is the key to personal freedom. By providing appropriate support systems, many more vulnerable high school students can be given the opportunity to succeed and develop resilience to overcome circumstantial adversities. With an ethnographic research style, I pragmatically collected data and reported the results of my participants with the purest intentions of assessing without interfering, but with listening and observing.

Sample & Recruitment

Ten high school students aged 17-22 were individually interviewed and asked 13 questions to provide the service recipient perspective. These interviews were recorded for use in confirming data during analysis. All participants were students that attended a local urban public high school. Requests to participate were sent via email by the school Dean. Staff that are employed at this local urban public high school were to be requested to participate. This study was to include faculty and other school staff participants to provide the service *provider* perspective. Staff and faculty were to be requested to participate in semi-structured focus groups via email from the school Dean. Focus groups with staff and faculty were to consist of three to four participants in three separate focus groups. The researcher intended to have an equal male to

female ratio of respondents with students and staff.

Data collection took place during February 2016. Retrieving student accounts, in comparison to staff accounts, was to provide commonalities and/or disparities regarding support services provided to vulnerable students of the local urban high school. Students were sent a short email by the Dean inquiring of their interest to participate in this study. The email contained a description of and an explanation for the project. All student participants were considered to be academically, socially, or emotionally vulnerable or identify with having behavioral issues, absenteeism, low academic performance, disinterest in academics, and displaying a disconnection from the school environment.

Data Collection & Analyses

Grounded theory practices were utilized in performing this data collection and analysis. Grounded theory is an inductive methodology and a research method that enabled the researcher to develop a theory which offers an explanation about the main concern of the population of substantive area and how that concern is resolved or processed. Grounded Theory is a general research method which guides the researcher on matters of data collection (where the researcher can use qualitative data of any type e.g. interviews, audio/video, images, text, observations, spoken word etc.) and details strict procedures for data analysis. This theory as a research tool has enabled the researcher to seek out and conceptualize the latent social patterns and structures of the area of interest through the process of constant comparison. The researcher identified and reported the most prominent patterns of response and tied those responses to the study's original purpose.

Semi-structured Interviews

In alignment with the principles of qualitative research, the primary data source included

a series of 10 semi-structured one-on-one interviews with local public high school students, each lasting approximately thirty to sixty minutes. A list of 13 interview questions were used to guide the interview structure throughout the sessions, however during the process the researcher allowed for participants to share their story in whatever capacity they were comfortable to allow for a deeper sense of experiences or themes to emerge.

Results

The goal of this section is to report the findings of data collected from students and staff at a local urban public high school. This data has provided insider perspectives regarding how student mental health or emotional well-being is addressed and how it intersects with academic performance. These interviews were conducted to comprehend empathetic student accounts of mental health support services available to them inside their school. Student responses allowed for direct insight into the intersection of their own mental health and their academic performance through self-report. Responses from school staff focus groups were to be used to understand staff perspectives of the best practices addressing student mental health in conjunction with student learning.

Examining multiple student and staff responses would have allowed the researcher to identify common patterns and themes or disparities of both; the services being *received* by students, and the services being *provided* by staff. However, the researcher was unable to obtain access to the staff perspectives due to restrictions of the institution. In communication with the school's Dean, the gatekeeper to the research, it appeared that her own bias may have played a role in the prevention of this portion of the study. The Dean had expressed to the researcher that she was unsure staff would have time or interest in participating. This led to the Deans' hesitation in inviting the staff to participate, which then led to the loss of time needed to execute

this portion of the study. After the lapse in time, of approximately 3 weeks, it was learned that there would be another level of approval required by the institution to conduct focus groups with staff. This study’s time restriction did not allow for the researcher to proceed with obtaining the required permissions needed to conduct focus groups with staff.

The below table provides a brief descriptive profile of each of the 10 student participants. Listed in the profiles are student’s age, grade level, family structure with whom they reside, how long they have lived in the city, whether they are involved in sports, and/or work, and if the student has plans for college.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

All participants are high school students attending a local urban high school.	
1.	Stacy -17 year old Junior. Resides with both parents and one younger sister. Moved to New Jersey at age 9 from the Dominican Republic. Plans to attend college. AP classes. Soccer. Works part-time. Will be 1 st generation college student.
2.	Melissa -19 year old Senior. Resides with both parents and has 2 older siblings. Lived in the city entire life. Plans to attend college. 1 st generation college student. Older sibling attended and completed college.
3.	Jason -17 year old Junior. Resides with both parents and has older brother. Plans to attend college. Football, wrestling, track. Will be 1 st generation college student.
4.	Jonathan -18 year old Senior. Resides with mother and no siblings. Plans for college in the fall and has further plans for doctoral degree. Hopes to open own practice in the area upon completion of degrees.
5.	Christopher -22 year old Sophomore. Resides with mother and 3 older siblings. Lived in the city whole life. Has a child on the way. No plans for college. Plans for GED or Job Core instead.
6.	Jennifer -18 year old Senior. Resides with mother. Lived in the city whole life. Has large step family on Dad’s side. Very close with half-sister of the same age. Dates of birth are within 2 weeks of each other. Works 2 jobs. Plans to attend Salem State College in the fall but is on academic probation and is at risk of not graduating. Will be 1 st generation college student.
7.	Susan -17 year old Junior. Resides in foster care. Lived in the city 5 yrs. Mom is in the Dominican Republic and is in and out of coma with cancer. Wants to join the army and become an air traffic controller. Loves extreme structured discipline. Reserve Officers' Training Corps leader in her team. Will be 1 st generation college student.

8.	George -18 year old Senior. Resides with mother. Father deceased when student was in 10 th grade. Lived in the city since the age of 5 from Queens NY. Plans to attend college. Baseball. Will be 1 st generation college student.
9.	John -18 year old Senior. Resides with both parents. Lived in the city whole life. Plans to attend college in the fall. Football. Academics okay enough to stay in football. Will be 1 st generation college student.
10.	Kevin -18 year old Senior. Resides with mother. Lived in the city whole life. Plans to attend college in the fall. Football. Academics okay enough to stay in football. Will be 1 st generation college student.

All ten students shared many similarities such as, they are all of Dominican descent and speak both Spanish and English, 8 out of 10 had plans to attend college, 5 out of 10 played sports, and 5 out of 10 had part-time jobs. Four of the students resided with both their mother and father, 5 resided with only their mother, and 1 is in foster care. Two of the questions that all of the student participants answered yes to were, ‘do you think school is important’, and ‘do you feel adequately supported by faculty and staff’.

Reflective analysis of data collected from one-on-one interviews with these ten local high school students revealed that students have high aspirations, seek a rigorous education, and want meaningful relationships with adults to help them navigate the challenges of adolescence and to be successful in their lives. Other prevalent patterns that emerged and were in direct alignment with the research questions were that: most students struggle with balancing and prioritizing responsibilities, most felt school is not rigorous or strict enough, and most felt tremendous support from faculty and staff. However, responses were mixed on whether students felt academically supported by parents. Most of the students have plans for college and most agreed that having professional mental health staff on-site at school would be beneficial.

Mental Health

Adolescent mental health can either help or hinder high school success. External distractions can deter focus, and lack of academic confidence or comprehension of the work can

lead to procrastination. Procrastination and stress can lead to students' feeling **overwhelmed**, likely causing even more stress. This process can cycle out of control and result in academic paralysis and ultimately, students giving up. To prevent this cycle from occurring, educating students with coping skills and strategies needed to balance and manage responsibilities can be addressed and provided by school mental health counselors.

Mental Health Counselor. Student participant opinions of whether or not an on-site school mental health counselor would be beneficial on the high school campus were positive. Participants responded with similar yes answers for a variety of reasons. Jennifer expressed the benefits of having a mental health counselor present at school as beneficial for herself and her peers.

“Yes there should always be a school mental health counselor because there are kids that have problems at home that need someone to talk to. They might be dealing with domestic violence stuff or whatever that they need help.”

George also expressed having a school counselor as beneficial and shared his reason why.

“Absolutely. I lost my Dad in 10th grade. Without the school adjustment counselor I never would made it through that year. She'd show up to my house with pizza and dinner all the time. She would stay and help me get through my hardest homework and projects. I was so broken at the time there was no way I could focus but her helping me was enough of a distraction to get me to do at least a little bit. And she kept sticking around. That regular being around she did. That's what helped me. She also talked deep to me too about how to grieve in healthy ways. She made sure I knew that this is something that no kid should have to go through at my age and she wasn't going to give up on me.....It was like really adult talks. But that was my life at the time and what I was dealing with. Without her it could have gone a completely different way.....”

Students, whether or not they have utilized a mental health counselor at school, recognized the positive service and support that could be provided for them if needed. Stacy, a junior, stated having a mental health counselor available for helping students would alleviate pressure and stress that alone would enhance academic performance.

“Of course. It makes sense. When times feel like outta control and stuff, because of who knows what. Then a lady or guy other than a teacher that has that type of personality can work with us differently than the teachers to help us work things out. We don’t wanna have to always talk to our teachers about that kinda stuff. The counselor is like a doctor, you can tell em everything. The teacher is there to help us learn, that’s it. But if we’re going through something then we don’t wanna learn anyway, so yea it’d be good.”

Balancing Responsibilities

The first prominent theme that emerged from the data collected was **balancing responsibilities**. Students expressed challenges in balancing multiple responsibilities, whether it was juggling academic assignments, sports and work, or just that they felt **overwhelmed**. In the interview with Stacy, she explains her challenges with time management.

*“Balance is hard. Sometimes I get **overwhelmed** and be tired from school, soccer, and work but then it’s so hard to catch up if I get lazy. Then, I feel like I need to get it together because I want more for myself.”*

In Melissa’s interview she referenced that she carried the additional pressure of her personal goals in **balancing** her responsibilities.

*“Trying not to fail in all the goals I have set for myself and stay focused. I get in these moods when I **procrastinate** because when I look at all I got to do I freeze and don’t know how to start. But all my teachers know me and know I will get my work done so they are not too tough*

on me with dates.”

While interviewing Jennifer, she also expressed balance as a struggle.

“I know I need education to get far but in my life I got a lotta other distractions with my family. I work two jobs to help my Mom out with money and stuff because she’s kinda sick so school ain’t always first on my list. I know I could do better but it’s like I don’t have a choice in all the other things happening and I gotta deal with it.”

While balance was not the most salient theme, nine out of the 10 student participants agreed that it was an obstacle to maintaining academic performance. The above three students highlight that the extent to which this obstacle affects their ability to maintain school as the number one priority.

Family Engagement in Academics

The second major theme that emerged was the presence of or lack of parental engagement in students academics. There were varying levels of parent engagement with the 10 students interviewed. Three students had little parental engagement. The other seven students had parents that set a standard of expectations on their children but did not really have much involvement with their schooling. One student Jennifer commented on her parental engagement; *“No. I’m not supported at home. If my Mom was more engaged then I would do better because then I would see that she actually wants me to work hard.”* Christopher expresses a level of parental engagement that reflects their expectations, but not their involvement.

“I come to school to make my mom proud because she don’t want me to have to go through what she went through but she don’t make me do nothing. Like, she does yell at me to go but she don’t know how to help me. She dropped out.”

Susan speaks to her experience of parental engagement which offers a different perspective from

her peers.

“No I’m not academically supported at home. I live in a foster home. They don’t make me do my homework. Either I do it or I don’t. I only do it in Ms. Smith’s class when I’m bored.”

Most students interviewed share a level of parental expectation but there is still a lack of parental involvement expressed. Students made direct connections between the support they receive at home and their academic performance.

Academic Performance

Academic Rigor & Accountability. Another theme that emerged was that the majority of students mentioned that this school is too lenient with academic accountability. Some said that too much focus was put on poorly behaving students as opposed to education. When asked if this school presented them with opportunities, more than half expressed concerns related to the lack of accountability to their education. In John’s interview he expressed too much focus on the non-academic concerns by both himself and the administration.

“Here we do the same thing every day, nothing to look forward to. There’s no exciting factor to it. They always flip flop on all the rules and started getting so much stricter on stupid stuff like who has a hooded sweatshirt on and less with the school work. Who cares? It’s so dumb. When I came in freshman year my only concern was football. Same with sophomore year. I didn’t care about the academics at all but it never really prevented me from passing. But now that I’m a senior I feel like a lot of stuff, it’s too late to learn and I know it’s gonna be harder at college. If my teachers... ..were more strict with me before I’d be better off now.”

This hooded sweatshirt issue refers to respectability politics that have been enforced at this high school due to restructuring policies taken place over the past four years.

Kevin, a senior preparing to attend college in the fall also highlighted his concern with

the schools lack of academic focus and too much emphasis on those who cause trouble.

“It’s boring and repetitive! The kids who cause trouble get all the attention. We got our own police here and it’s such a distraction and they become the focus instead of, oh we supposed to be learning something. Everybody is so concerned with safety, and I get it but then it just puts all the attention back on the bad kids. I sorta feel like I’m missing stuff compared to other kids at other schools.”

In reference to the lack of accountability theme, Jason’s frustration echoes that of the other students in not holding them to a higher academic standard.

“This school could do a better job at giving kids the drive that they need to want to learn something. Freshman year I found it so easy for me but then I look back and feel I messed up big time, you’re a disappointment, because nobody made me do nothing. Sophomore year I was getting up there but not at the level I could have been at. Now, in junior year its hit me, like, either I do something right now or I’ll be stuck here 20 years from now doing the same thing. I wish someone told me this stuff earlier. I think they make it too easy for us and assume we don’t think about later.”

Susan describes not being held accountable and having her work completed for her as long as she shows up.

“In algebra, I don’t understand anything. I know nothing but the teachers just wanna see you show up. I could do it the same thing over and over and it’s like, I dunno, I dunno why I can’t get it. But I just show up for the help and they do the work for you. They be like, here’s the answer, honey.”

While Jennifer expresses regret for not putting forth more effort on her own, she identifies the need for more accountability from the administrative level.

“I wish I could change the way I acted and the lack of attention I put into my classes over the last 4 years. The school could have given me more consequences to not doing my work. I felt very free to do whatever I want.”

Through these interviews with the students, a clear theme is their desire for school administrators to hold them accountable for their work and their learning. These examples highlight a lack of accountability as negatively impacting overall academic performance.

Expectations for the Future. The last salient theme that emerged from the data that most students shared were plans to attend college. Eight out of the 10 students interviewed have plans to attend college. Responses to the question, do you plan to attend college, highlighted an enthusiastic intent to do so. In Stacy’s interview she stated,

“Yea I’m going to college! I’m going for something bigger. My Mom wants me to go to community college, but I’m not doing all this work to only go to a community college. I’m not saying it’s a bad thing, but I’ve been working hard to reach for something better.”

Melissa also states her clear intent to attend and succeed in the next phase of her life after high school.

“The most important thing to me right now is getting into college. Going to the college I want to because I feel like I set such a high standard for myself that if I don’t get into my two picks I will be devastated. I want to be able to get out of this place and try to expand things and meet new people and not be in the same setting that I have been for the past 18 years.

Each of the eight student participants with plans to attend college were sustaining various levels of academic performance from all honors advanced placement courses to academic probation with the risk of dropping out. Those at risk of dropping out are enrolled in an academic intervention program to help them increase their grade point average to meet minimum

college entry requirements. Student perceptions regarding the lack of rigor and accountability regarding their education raises concern about the message being sent to students about their school and proving them academic preparedness. This in depth data set collected from the high school students provided a rich overview of what their impressions are of mental health, the importance of it, how it can impact their education, and how their school addresses student well-being.

Discussion

The data collected in this study emphasized the impact of students' mental health or emotional well-being on academic performance. This study creates a platform for student voices to be heard, while also promoting the capacity for students to obtain emotional support services when needed. As stated in the literature, creating agency for youth and including them in decision making provides them with a needed sense of autonomy, self-efficacy, empowerment, identity development, belonging, and connectedness (Zeldin, 2004). Opinions of minors are often dismissed, making the sharing of data in this manner a distinctive contribution to the literature.

Adolescence is a critical period for mental, social, and emotional wellbeing and development. Mental health and social and emotional wellbeing, combined with sexual and reproductive development, identity development, and increasing autonomy and responsibility form part of a complex web of potential challenges to adolescents' healthy emotional and physical development. During adolescence, the brain undergoes significant developmental changes and these alterations make this period a time of vulnerability and adjustment (Schwarz, 2009; Casey, Jones, & Hare, 2008). Adolescent development, coupled with hormonal changes, makes them more prone to depression and more likely to engage in risky and thrill-seeking

behaviors than either younger children or adults (Schwarz, 2009). These and other factors underscore the importance of meeting the mental, social, and emotional health needs of our students. By referring students to seek out other services, or services outside the school, the message being sent is that it is not the schools responsibility to deal with these issues.

Overall, the literature reviewed is consistent with the results discovered in this study. When analyzing the data, the two most significant findings revealed were that education becomes compromised if lifestyle deems students vulnerable or emotionally fragile, and that parental engagement is a significant predictor of academic performance. It was discovered that students felt they are not held accountable to their academic responsibilities because of the vulnerabilities that surround them such as, poverty, minority or immigrant status, English language learners, single parent home, unwanted pregnancy, and exposure to criminal activity. There appeared to be minimal consequences for incompleting schoolwork until senior year, which then prohibits graduation. Results also matched the literature when comparing parental engagement as a predictor of student academic performance (Mapp, 2013). Students with high grade point averages expressed having highly engaged parents. Students with low grade point averages said their parents are not at all involved with their educational responsibilities.

In relation to the literature, the data showed how the reality of adverse circumstances faced by students had compromised their educational outcomes. Students reported that because of the adversity faced in their home life, school administration and faculty had reduced expectations, as opposed to creating what they assumed would become additional insurmountable obstacles. Through misguided assumptions and misconceptions, this reaction undermines student capabilities and contributes to the growing education gap existent between prosperous and underprivileged schools. Previous research by Zeldin (2004), reflects this

concept when describing stereotypical misconceptions that vulnerable adolescents are labeled with and these misconceptions can prevent adults from providing opportunities for students to become successful (Zeldin, 2004). Students should always be encouraged, empowered and liberated from existent constraints.

Susan and George's stories provided exemplary examples as to why school counselors are so important. Susan's residing in foster care, due to her mother's terminal illness, had undoubtedly shaped faculty expectations and her academic performance. During the interview, Susan communicated with a smirk, that because of their concern for her emotional state, that faculty were often too lenient with her compared to other students. She commented that they are always afraid she's going to lose control. Susan has also figured out how to further exploit the situation to avoid doing her schoolwork. Recognizing the position of teachers and that their purpose is to educate, it is apparent that they are stretched into other roles here. This clearly indicates the need for implementing other appropriate resources, such as a school mental health counselor.

As George had so explicitly stated, that without his high school adjustment counselor, his life could have gone a in a completely different direction. The loss of his father during sophomore year left his entire family emotionally broken. He spoke to how the support of his school counselor kept him on track with his school work and that without that support, he could have potentially, and likely dropped out of school, becoming another failed statistic. For vulnerable adolescent students, academics need to be supplemented with caring adults offering multiple types of support. It is understood that faculty and staff have a job to do, so, sharing the responsibilities as a team with specific expertise is what is required to truly serve this population

of students. Having a mental health counselor available at the school offers that therapeutic space for students that is so needed.

Academic Accountability

Other participant stories also revealed that low academic accountability had impacted their academic performance in negative ways. Students repeatedly commented that they were able to progress through the school system without having to put forth their best efforts. Because of Susan being in foster care and having to live without her mother, and other adversities that George, John, Kevin, Jason, and Jennifer face, it appears that faculty feel sympathetic about their students' circumstances which can lead to a compromised education.

When discussing the adversities faced by students at this high school, participants recognized that they were stereotypically considered marginalized, vulnerable or at-risk simply by residing in an urban city. Students were highly conscious of the exposure to such adversities and how it can impact their academic performance. Although, most would consider these adversities as legitimate barriers to student success, student participants showed their resilience and seemed to reject that notion with eight out of the 10 participants interviewed planning to attend college and achieve their goals regardless of present adversities.

Parental Engagement

The second major theme that repeatedly emerged from data was parental engagement and the influence parents have on student academic performance. While conversing with students about how involved their parents were responses were mixed. However, there appeared to be an association between grade point averages (GPA) and parent engagement. Students' who described having highly engaged parents also reported high academic achievement, while those who reported low parental engagement articulated that they were not even reaching minimum

academic requirements. Extracted from a meta-analysis done by Yamamoto & Holloway 2010, students whose parents hold high expectations receive higher grades, achieve higher test scores on standardized tests, and persist longer in school than those whose parents hold relatively low expectations.

According to previous research by Mapp (2013), students with engaged families earn higher grades and test scores, enroll in higher level programs, adapt better to school, exhibit higher attendance rates, have better social skills and behaviors, and have higher graduation rates and post-secondary success. Bowen and Dodd (2011) reported on recognizing the significant role of family is a key part of student academic achievement. Reiterated from Yamamoto & Holloway (2010) was that parental expectations have been found to play a critical role in student academic success. It is important to note that parents' lack of engagement was not due to their lack of concern or care. Lack of engagement by parents appeared to stem from feelings of educational inadequacy based on their own past experience with school (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Due to limited English proficiency, financial constraints, and limited experience with the educational system in the U.S., immigrant parents often find it difficult to communicate with and work on children's homework, and feel a low sense of efficacy in helping their high schooler (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Parent engagement is directly linked to scholastic and social resilience (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010).

My overall observations on whether or not vulnerable high school students need development guidance and/or mental health support is that, indeed, they do. Students themselves reported not receiving the guidance at home needed to academically support them through high school. It is also apparent that high school students do not exactly know what they need, as they are not aware of what they are missing in comparison to students at other schools. A vast

disconnect exists between student perceptions of how they are truly performing academically versus the rankings that are reported. Research shows that there is a massive gap between educational aspirations and expectations (Boxer, Goldstein, DeLorenzo, Savoy, & Mercado, 2011). Expectations of the work that is required to meet ambitious aspirations, such as becoming a lawyer or a doctor, are often immensely misguided.

What I have found, is that this mental conflict high school students are experiencing may not be a crisis while they are still in their high school, but, as referenced in Erikson's theory, students may be on a path to experiencing an identity crisis. Because most of the students in this high school will be first generation college students, the pressure of college requirements is significantly more difficult than expected. What is going to happen to these students in this upcoming crisis, when they already do not have the family support during high school? If they do not succeed in college, how is that going to affect their identity as an adult?

Intervention & Prevention Models

The literature outlines various types of interventions and preventions such as, after school academic enrichment programs or referrals to a community behavioral health clinician as resources for serving students that are having emotional issues. Intervention and prevention programs were designed as models aimed at increasing social capital of the community by increasing socioeconomic status and relationships with schools (Dodd & Bowen, 2011). After school programs allow for parents to work longer hours and have full time jobs while also strengthening relationships with schools.

When participants were asked if they were offered intervention or prevention services within their school, most referred to academic supports. One participant discussed that she is attending Academic Academy (AA). AA is an afterschool program provided for seniors at-risk

of not meeting graduation requirements. Here, they are given an opportunity to increase their GPAs to meet graduation requirements. Participants were then asked if they were aware of any mental health resources available to them within the school and if they felt that would be a beneficial resource. A few participants said they were not aware of any specific service, but stated that Miss Anderson, the school adjustment counselor, was there for them.

Positive Youth Development Theory

As previously discussed in the literature review, positive youth development theory was stated as the newest and best framework for use in working with vulnerable students. However, I was unable to make any specific connections to the use or implementation of positive youth development practices at this high school with the participants of this study. For vulnerable students experiencing mental health, emotional, or behavioral issues, school is the place where they should be able to talk with a professional counselor about their concerns. Because of required attendance, school is the one safety net through which educators have an opportunity to reach and help these students. Professionals working with vulnerable students need to approach problematic mental health or emotional instability immediately. Otherwise, we are leaving students open to bigger, and at times, irreparable risk. If too much time has passed, the help is likely to arrive too late. It is imperative that episodes of concern be taken seriously and addressed immediately to avoid serious harm. The goal should always be to investigate what the true problem is and lend support for the student work through it.

The time is long overdue for educators to realize mental health as a prevailing problem inside our high schools. In 2013, suicide was the second leading cause of death among teens aged 15-19 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, Adolescent Health, 2016). Incident rates for anxiety, depression, PTSD, substance use, and

domestic violence among teens have reached epidemic proportions. In 2013, 22% of high school students reported feeling so sad or hopeless daily for at least two weeks during the previous year that they discontinued their usual activities, and 14% reported non-suicidal self-injury during the past year. That same year, 42% of high school students reported that in the previous 12 months they had felt the need to talk to an adult regarding their feelings or current issues in their lives (Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Health and Risk Behaviors of Massachusetts Youth, 2013). Research reported that, in 2013, almost half of Massachusetts students needed to speak to an adult, yet we still have high schools without mental health professionals. These statistics reflect a rising need for emotional support of high school students. A proactive and timely response is required to meet this imminent need.

Implications for Policy, Practice and Research

Policy Level Recommendations

A well-financed mental health system that fosters communication and cooperation across the district can provide adolescents better access to high quality resources that are responsive to their unique mental health needs. Based on a report released by Schwarz 2009, for the National Center for Children in Poverty, in order to achieve this, federal and state governments should:

- Fund programs for adolescents that, based on positive youth development frameworks, foster improved decision-making skills and provide positive models for behavior to reduce risk-taking behaviors. Adolescents are particularly resourceful and resilient and respond well to positive engagement strategies that help provide a social support structure.
-

- Provide funding to replicate comprehensive school-based health centers throughout the state. Access to on-site, school-based mental health services in school-based health centers increases the likelihood that adolescents will receive mental health services.
- Pass legislation to enhance confidentiality protection to improve adolescents' access to confidential services. Inconsistent and unclear policies regarding adolescent patient confidentiality can create additional barriers to mental health care. Only 45% of adolescents surveyed would seek care for depression if parental notification were required.
- Provide funding to attract, train, and retain a more diverse workforce of health care providers. Cultural differences between patient and provider can lead to misdiagnosis of major mental illness, while ethnic and gender matching has been shown to lead to lower dropout rates in mental health treatments.
- Institute financing mechanisms to support necessary services, especially in venues that increase access, such as schools, youth centers, and adolescent specific health and wellness centers. Insurance restrictions, poor funding, and low priorities for resources are among the key obstacles impeding access of adolescents to the services necessary to treat mental health disorders.

Practice Level Recommendations

- Centralize the role of mental health counselors specifically trained in adolescent development in all public high schools.
 - Institute empirically based education programs to help schools, parents, and students recognize mental health problems. Education for staff, parents and students about the mental health of adolescents and what signs to be aware of.
-

- Implement empirically based intervention and prevention strategies and programs for student mental health needs in schools.
- Employ counseling professionals with expert knowledge and experience in adolescent development.

Research Recommendations

Recommendations for future research initiatives include obtaining permissions to access a more targeted group of specific participants that have mental health diagnoses, utilize a therapist, and/or regulate mood imbalances and impulse control with medication. Or, through use of anonymous surveys, focus on a more specified sample. Replication of this study at the same location may result in a deeper understanding of this school's mental health employment responsibilities to best serve its students. Replication of this study at other public high schools may produce insight into their students' mental health service needs.

Additional research efforts are needed to develop effective school-based and adolescent specific strategies for improving the appropriate mental health care for those students who may be positioned to benefit from it. It is likely that the current increasing demand for mental health services in U.S. high schools will require the implementation of treatments that have previously been restricted to hospitals, and that treatments with adequate empirical support will be modified or otherwise flexibly implemented in an attempt to meet the growing needs of high school students. Although the scale of the current situation poses challenges to both service providers (school counselors) and recipients (students), it also presents unprecedented opportunities for scientific investigation and the continued development of evidence-based interventions for adolescent mental illnesses. Future research designs may benefit from the inclusion of quantitative methods and longitudinal approaches to follow students over time.

Limitations

Because this study is rooted in an action research paradigm, which is specific to each group studied, findings may not be generalizable for other urban high schools. This research study was a cross-sectional design that relied on data reflective of a small sample size of only ten students in one urban high school setting. This high schools population is predominantly Latino and presents unique and complex race and class dynamics.

Sample. One limitation of this study was that recruitment of participants welcomed and invited all general high school students to be interviewed. Due to confidentiality restrictions, the researcher was unable to gain access to specific knowledge about students with social, emotional, or behavioral mental illness diagnoses or to those that have utilized a therapist. More intentional recruitment of, or access to, participants that do have a mental health diagnosis or that frequented therapeutic services would have provided a more substantial data set for making the case to require an expertly trained school counselor at every high school.

Design. Another major limitation of this study was, as previously discussed in the method's section, the researcher's inability to obtain faculty as participants. The intent was to compare perceptions of mental health and academic services received by students with the perceptions of services provided by faculty. The reason for comparing student's perceptions with faculty's perceptions was to gauge whether or not current practices being applied were effective or alternatives were needed. Inability to obtain data from faculty eliminated the service provider perception of practices leaving surfaced results heavily represented by students only. Retrieving advanced approval of faculty and including their perspective would have revealed a more nuanced representation.

Time Constraints. Some of these limitations could have been alleviated if it not for the limited amount of time allotted for the collection of data. All data collection had to be retrieved and completed in an approximated four-week time frame. Had deadlines not been so tight, I would have proceeded with the initial intention to include faculty and staff focus groups, even after the gatekeeper's hesitation to reach out to them with requests to participate. Time restraints eliminated the ability to include the service provider perception, which would have presented clearer insight into the schools administrative climate, and a more accurate and balanced portrayal of efforts to address student mental health and well-being.

Conclusion

To reiterate my major findings, vulnerable high school students are navigating an already complex stage of their life during adolescence. Lack of family engagement, poverty restrictions, and exposure to crime or trauma can further exacerbate the challenges of being a student and impede student success. However, despite such obstacles, results revealed that these students have high aspirations, seek a rigorous education, and want meaningful relationships with adults to help them navigate the challenges of adolescence and to be successful in their lives.

My recommendations are to treat each high school student as an individual and, as a whole person. For public high school institutions serving vulnerable student populations, school cannot be about providing academics only. Schools serving this population must also have a strong mental health support structures in place in order to present its students with the greatest opportunity for success. Education practitioners must align themselves together with mental health practitioners as a team, inside schools, to empower, encourage and promote student capacity. This project has deeply enlightened the researcher by transcending all expectations, removing previous biases and preconceived notions about this school and its student population

and provided a true transitional growth experience. I hope this research will serve as a rich and practical resource to future practitioners and researchers.

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Appendix A

*School Permission to Conduct Research*

December 1, 2015

Dear Institutional Review Board:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that I give *Kristy Forrest, Graduate Fellow at Merrimack College* permission to conduct the research entitled *The Intersection of Adolescent Mental Health & Academic Performance at the _____ High School*. This also serves as assurance that this school complies with requirements of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research.

Sincerely,

_____,
Dean of Students
Title of School

Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA):

- The right of a parent of a student to inspect, upon the request of the parent, a survey created by a third party before the survey is administered or distributed by a school to a student.
 - Any applicable procedures for granting a request by a parent for reasonable access to such survey within a reasonable period of time after the request is received.
 - Arrangements to protect student privacy that are provided by the agency in the event of the administration or distribution of a survey to a student containing one or more of the following items (including the right of a parent of a student to inspect, upon the request of the parent, any survey containing one or more of such items): Political affiliations or beliefs of the student or the student's parent. Mental or psychological problems of the student or the student's family. Sex behavior or attitudes. Illegal, anti-social, self-incriminating, or demeaning behavior. Critical appraisals of other individuals with whom respondents have close family relationships. Legally recognized privileged or analogous relationships, such as those of lawyers, physicians, and ministers. Religious practices, affiliations, or beliefs of the student or the student's parent. Income (other than that required by law to determine eligibility for participation in a program or for receiving financial assistance under such program).
 - The right of a parent of a student to inspect, upon the request of the parent, any instructional material used as part of the educational curriculum for the student. Any applicable procedures for granting a request by a parent for reasonable access to instructional material received.
 - The administration of physical examinations or screenings that the school or agency may administer to a student.
 - The collection, disclosure, or use of personal information collected from students for the purpose of marketing or for selling that information (or otherwise providing that information to others for that purpose), including arrangements to protect student privacy that are provided by the agency in the event of such collection, disclosure, or use.
 - The right of a parent of a student to inspect, upon the request of the parent, any instrument used in the collection of personal information before the instrument is administered or distributed to a student.
 - Any applicable procedures for granting a request by a parent for reasonable access to such instrument within a reasonable period of time after the request is received.
-

Appendix B

Subject: Invitation to participate in a Research Study entitled,
The Intersection of Adolescent Mental Health & Academic Performance.

Dear Student of _____ High Schools,

My name is Kristy Forrest. I am a Community Engagement Graduate Fellow at Merrimack College. I am working to obtain my Master's degree in order to secure a career working with high school students. I have a passion for teens and enjoy advocating for high school students in getting their needs met. I am developing a research project to examine the current perceptions of services students are receiving for helping them to achieve their highest academic potential. To me, high school is more than just academics. I believe we need to acknowledge the entire student as an individual in supporting them to succeed in high school.

Through this research project I am looking to identify the best ways to support students that are struggling either academically, socially, or emotionally at school. The students "job" or purpose of attending high school is for students to learn, expand their knowledge, develop and grow, and to experience feeling empowered, and build confidence in ones abilities. However, this is not every student's experience. I believe the professionals in the field are responsible for providing the best services of support available to our students that may be struggling. Who better to identify those services than the students? As the student, you are in the best position to identify your needs. My goal for this project is to listen to you and present you with an opportunity to have your voice heard. The student perspective is the dominant perspective in this project.

I would like to invite you to participate in my study by granting me an interview. The interview process will entail one, 30-60 minute sessions, and take place over a four week period during the month of February. We will meet once in February. I will come to you at the school to conduct the interviews. Interview times will be scheduled to accommodate your time when it is most convenient for you. During the interview, I will ask up to 13 semi-structured questions for you to provide me with answers to. Your responses will provide with me insight as to how you, the student, think about the services offered to you for support in your school. Our interviews will be audio recorded unless you decide you are not comfortable with the recording process. Your identity will be protected and kept confidential as I will not include anyone's name in any of the documentation of this research project. Guiding questions are attached for your review. You may

at any time decline to answer any questions or topics you are not comfortable with discussing. You may also, at any time request to have your responses deleted from the interviews.

Please join me in pursuing ways to make your time at high school the best possible experience it can be. I look forward to hearing from you.

Please feel free to contact me at forrestk@merrimack.edu with any questions or concerns about this research.

Thank you,

Kristy Forrest
Community Engagement Graduate Fellow
Class of 2016
781-718-9835
forrestk@merrimack.edu

Appendix C



Child Assent Form

Introduction and Contact Information

This research project entitled, *The Intersection of Adolescent Mental Health & Academic Performance* is a research study designed to identify the most effective intervention and prevention practices, and support services provided to high school students in reaching their highest academic potential. As a parent, you are being asked to give permission for your child to participate in this study. Your child will be asked to participate in one, 30-60 minute interviews over a four weeks during the month of February. Your child will be asked to answer a series of approximately 13 questions. Questions of inquiry will attempt to measure academic interest or disinterest, study habits, delivery structure of lessons received in class and support services available for when students are struggling. I will inquire as to whether or not your child is engaged in their school work, and if not, why. If your child is experiencing disinterest in school, I will then ask what can be done to capture their interest. I would like to work with your child to improve their high school experience by transforming obstacles into opportunities. My goal is for your child is to experience the reward of school success and to view school as a place that encourages them to feel empowered and successful. No one will be able to identify you or your child in these reports. Please read this form and feel free to ask questions before signing. If you have questions about this form, please contact Kristy Forrest, Graduate Fellow at Merrimack College. forrestk@merrimack.edu 781-718-9835.

What am I being asked to do?

Your child is being asked to participate in one 30-60 minute interview session during the school day. Interviews will take place in the High School during the month of February. During each interview, using guiding questions, the researcher will ask the current status of student opinions and perceptions regarding their high school experience. Based on the student responses, the researcher will work with students to identify the most effective ways for high school staff and families to support them in reaching their highest academic potential.

If at any time, you or your child have a question regarding this study, you can ask the researcher of *The Intersection of Adolescent Mental Health & Academic Performance* if there is a question that you do not understand. forrestk@merrimack.edu 781-718-9835.

Can anything bad happen to me?

There are very few, or no risks in completing these interviews. If you or your child feels uncomfortable and decides to skip any of the questions your child will still be able to participate in the *The Intersection of Adolescent Mental Health & Academic Performance*. Your child may choose at any time to skip any question asked by the researcher.

Will anyone know about the information I provide?

Only the researcher and college professor of the researcher involved in the *The Intersection of Adolescent Mental Health & Academic Performance* study will see the answers you provide in the interviews. However, all names will be replaced with pseudonyms or numbers (subject number 1) and the actual participants will be unable to be identified by anyone other than the researcher.

What will I receive?

You will receive valuable insight into the academic, social, and emotional needs of your child in order for them to have a positive experience in high school. High school students should be able to take advantage of the opportunities presented to them while in high school and access that space as an opportunity for growth, empowerment, and a step in obtaining a bright future. By allowing your child to participate in this study, I hope that you and your child will better understand what your child needs in order to have the most effective learning experience while in high school. Through this study, all parties involved (High School staff, parents, students, the researcher, and the knowledge contribution to the academic literature) will have the opportunity to discover potential improvements and/or alternative supports to educating our high school students.

What if I do not want to do this?

If you decide not to allow permission for your child to participate in these interviews there will be no consequence to you or your child. If you do not wish to have your child participate in any aspects of the study, you or your child will not be penalized and your child will continue as a student in the normal activities of the High School.

Parent or Guardian Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Student Name: _____

I HAVE READ THIS ASSENT FORM. MY QUESTIONS HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. MY SIGNATURE ON THIS FORM MEANS THAT I UNDERSTAND THE INFORMATION AND I AGREE TO COMPLETE THE QUESTIONNAIRE, HAVE MY

**HEIGHT, WEIGHT, AND FITNESS MEASURED, AND SHARE MY INFORMATION
IN REPORTS OF THE ACTIVE SCIENCE CURRICULUM PROGRAM.**

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Research Staff

Printed Name of Participant

Printed Name of Research Staff

Niño Formulario de Consentimiento

Introducción y Información de Contacto

Este proyecto de investigación titulado *The Intersection of Adolescent Mental Health & Academic Performance* es un estudio de investigación diseñado para identificar las prácticas de intervención y prevención más efectivas, y servicios de apoyo prestados a los estudiantes de secundaria a alcanzar su máximo potencial académico. Como padre, le están pidiendo a dar permiso para que su hijo participe en este estudio. Se le pedirá a su hijo a participar en dos, una hora entrevistas, durante cuatro semanas de los meses de enero y febrero. Se le pedirá a su hijo a responder a una serie de aproximadamente 13 preguntas. Preguntas de investigación tratarán de medir el interés o desinterés académico, hábitos de estudio, la estructura de la entrega de las lecciones recibidas en clase y servicios de apoyo disponibles para cuando los estudiantes están luchando. Voy a investigar en cuanto a si es o no su hijo se dedica a su trabajo escolar, y si no, por qué. Si su niño está experimentando el desinterés en la escuela, voy a continuación, pedir lo que se puede hacer para captar su interés. Me gustaría trabajar con su hijo para mejorar su experiencia en la preparatoria al transformar los obstáculos en oportunidades. Mi meta es que su hijo es experimentar la recompensa del éxito escolar y para ver la escuela como un lugar que les anima a sentir poder y éxito. Nadie será capaz de usted o su hijo identificar en estos informes. Por favor, lea este formulario y no dude en hacer preguntas antes de firmar. Si tiene alguna pregunta sobre este formulario, por favor comuníquese con Kristy Forrest, Graduate Fellow en Merrimack College. forrestk@merrimack.edu 781-718-9835.

Lo que se me pide que haga?

Se le pide a su hijo a participar en dos sesiones de una hora de entrevista separadas durante un lapso de tiempo de cuatro semanas. Las entrevistas se llevarán a cabo en el Humanidades y Academia de Liderazgo en el the High School secundaria durante los meses de enero y febrero. Durante cada entrevista, con preguntas de orientación, el investigador solicitará a la situación actual de las opiniones y percepciones de los estudiantes sobre su experiencia en la preparatoria. Sobre la base de las respuestas de los estudiantes, el investigador va a trabajar con los estudiantes para identificar las formas más efectivas para alta personal de la escuela y las familias para ayudarles a alcanzar su máximo potencial académico.

Si en algún momento, usted o su hijo tiene alguna duda con respecto a este estudio, se le puede pedir al investigador de educar *The Intersection of Adolescent Mental Health & Academic Performance* del esperado si hay una pregunta que usted no entiende. forrestk@merrimack.edu 781-718-9835.

¿Puede pasarme algo malo a mí?

Hay muy pocos, o ningún riesgo en la realización de estas entrevistas. Si usted o su hijo se siente incómodo y decide omitir las preguntas su hijo podra participar en la investigación. Su hijo en cualquier momento podra omitir cualquier pregunta hecha por el investigador.

¿Se sabra acerca de la información que voy a compartir?

Sólo el investigador y profesor de la universidad del investigador involucrado en el estudio verá las respuestas que usted proporciona en las entrevistas. Sin embargo, todos los nombres serán reemplazados con seudónimos o números (sujeto número 1) y los participantes reales no podrá ser identificado por cualquier persona que no sea el investigador.

¿Qué voy a recibir?

Usted recibirá información valiosa sobre las necesidades académicas, sociales y emocionales de su hijo con el fin de que tengan una experiencia positiva en la escuela secundaria. Los estudiantes de secundaria deben ser capaces de aprovechar las oportunidades que se les presentan, mientras que en la escuela secundaria y acceder a ese espacio como una oportunidad para el crecimiento, el empoderamiento, y un paso en la obtención de un futuro brillante. Al permitir que su hijo participe en este estudio, espero que usted y su niño va a entender mejor lo que su hijo necesita para tener la experiencia más eficaz de aprendizaje, mientras que en la escuela secundaria. A través de este estudio, todas las partes implicadas (padres, estudiantes, del investigador, y la contribución del conocimiento de la literatura académica) tendrán la oportunidad de descubrir las posibles mejoras y / o soportes alternativos para la educación de nuestros estudiantes de secundaria.

¿Qué pasa si no quiero hacer esto?

Si usted decide a no permitir que su hijo participe en estas entrevistas no habrá consecuencias para usted o su hijo. Si no desea que su hijo participe en cualquier aspecto del estudio, usted o su hijo no será penalizado y su hijo continuará como estudiante en las actividades normales de la High School.

Padre o Tutor Firma: _____ **Fecha:** _____

Nombre del estudiante: _____

HE LEIDO ESTE FORMULARIO asentimiento. MIS preguntas han sido contestadas. MI FIRMA EN ESTE FORMULARIO SIGNIFICA QUE ENTIENDO LA INFORMACIÓN Y estoy de acuerdo para completar el cuestionario, TENER MI ALTURA, PESO, Y APTITUD medido, Y COMPARTIR MI INFORMACIÓN EN LOS INFORMES DEL PROGRAMA CURRICULAR CIENCIA ACTIVA.

Firma del Participante

Fecha

Firma del Personal Investigador

Nombre en molde del Participante

Nombre en molde del Personal Investigador

Appendix D

Interview Questions for High School Students

1. Do you like school?
Yes or no?
If yes, why?
If not, why?
 2. Do you think school is important?
“
 3. What is the most important thing in your life right now?
 4. Are you engaged in your school responsibilities?
“
 5. Do you want to go to school or come because you have to?
“
 6. Do you see high school as a place that presents you with opportunities?
“
 7. Do you equate high school performance with your future success?
“
 8. Do you feel adequately supported by faculty and staff at school?
“
 9. What current support services are you aware of at your school? ,.
 10. Do you feel academically supported at home?
 11. What is your biggest challenge right now?
 12. What do you find is your largest obstacle for achieving your highest academic potential?
 13. If you could change anything about the high school education you are receiving what would it be?
-

Appendix E

Subject: Invitation to participate in a Research Study entitled,
The Intersection of Mental Health & Academic Performance

Dear Faculty and Staff of the High School,

My name is Kristy Forrest. I am a Community Engagement Graduate Fellow at Merrimack College. I am working to obtain my Master's degree in order to secure a career working with high school students. I have a passion for teens and enjoy advocating for high school students in getting their needs met. I am developing a research project to examine the current perceptions of support services students are receiving for helping them to achieve their highest academic potential. To me, high school is more than just academics. I believe we need to acknowledge the entire student as an individual in supporting them to succeed in high school.

Through this research project I am looking to identify the best ways to support high school students that are struggling either academically, socially, or emotionally at school. Students are responsible for attending high school to learn, expand their knowledge, develop and grow, and to experience feeling empowered, and build confidence in their abilities. However, this is not every student's experience. I believe the professionals in the field are responsible for providing the best services of support available to our struggling students. I would like inquire about which strategies you currently utilize for effectively teaching students that are struggling. I would also like to investigate current support services offered to students and to evaluate if those services are, in your opinion, effective. Although the student perspective is dominant in this project, I acknowledge that educating adolescents is not one sided and that it is a collaboration of multiple contributors. Incorporating faculty and staff perceptions are extremely valuable for me to obtain a full and accurate understanding of how best to serve our underperforming students. This research will look to assess existing practices within the school system, as well as acknowledge recommendations for improvement in minimizing underperforming students.

I would like to invite you to participate in my study by participating in a focus group. The focus group process will entail two separate sessions. Each session will take up to one hour, and take place over a four week period during the months of January and February. Ideally, I will have 3-4 staff participants per group and gather 3-4 groups in total. We will meet once in January and once in February. I will come to you at the school to conduct the focus group sessions. Focus group times will be coordinated and scheduled to accommodate your time when it is most

convenient for you. During the focus group sessions, I will ask up to 14 semi-structured questions for you to provide me with answers to. Your responses will provide with me insight as to what you, the education professional, think about the systems and structures of services offered to your students. Our focus group sessions will be audio recorded unless you decide you are not comfortable with the recording process. Your identity will be protected and kept confidential as I will not include anyone's name in any of the documentation of this research project. Guiding questions are attached for your review. You may at any time decline to answer any questions or topics you are not comfortable with discussing. You may also, at any time request to have your responses deleted from the interviews.

Please join me in pursuing ways to make student experiences at high school the best possible experience it can be. I look forward to hearing from you.

Please feel free to contact me at forrestk@merriamck.edu with any questions or concerns about this research.

Thank you kindly,

Kristy Forrest
Community Engagement Graduate Fellow
Class of 2016
781-718-9835
forrestk@merrimack.edu

Appendix F



INFORMED CONSENT

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH PROJECT ENTITLED: *The Intersection of Adolescent Mental Health & Academic Performance*

Principal Investigator(s): Kristy Forrest

You are invited to take part in a research study examining the best practices for increasing the academic performance of students who are struggling. You have been asked to be in this study because as professionals in the field I would like to incorporate your perspective into my study, along with student's perspectives of whether current support services are working. Recognizing that we share a passion for working with teens and as I aspire to become a professional working in the field of supporting adolescents, your experience and insight will be profoundly valuable to me for conducting my research.

Procedures: If you choose to participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in a focus group. The focus group contains questions about what you think are the largest challenges or obstacles for students in reaching their highest academic potential and what you have found to be the most effective solutions. The focus groups will meet twice and take approximately 45 - 60 minutes to complete.

For the accuracy of data collection and to ensure that remarks made are accurate, this session will be audio recorded. These recordings will be transcribed with no personal identifiers included and then destroyed. If you are not comfortable being audio recorded please inform the investigator prior to starting the interview. It is your right to not be recorded if you so choose. You may at any time ask the investigator conducting the focus group to turn off the recorder. If there are certain questions you have answered that are recorded but after the fact feel uncomfortable with, you may ask to have that content erased from the recording.

Benefits: This study will be a direct benefit to you by providing you with student feedback of support services received by them. The questions asked in this study will help me to comprehend the strategies you choose and why. A current and thorough investigation of academically underperforming student needs, which also evaluates services provided, will inform both students and staff whether existing practices are the most effective or if there are more effective, yet absent alternatives.

Potential Risks: There are no inherent physical risks in the procedures themselves, and it is not anticipated that participants will experience risks in completing the focus groups. Participants will not be exposed to any more risk of harm or discomfort than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. Occasionally, an individual may be more aware of ongoing stresses as a result of completing the focus group. If this is the case, you are free to discontinue completing the focus group at any time. In addition, information about supportive professional counseling services will be made available should you be interested.

Confidentiality: The information from the focus group will be used for research purposes only. Your responses will be identified by a number and the identity of any participant will be kept confidential. In addition, your name will not be used in any reports or publications of this study.

Freedom of Choice to Participate: You are free (1) to decide whether or not to participate, (2) whether or not to be recorded (at any time) if you choose to participate are also free (3) to withdraw from the study at any time. A decision not to participate will not adversely affect any interactions with the investigator or any representative/employee of the High School.

Questions: Before you sign this form, please ask any questions on any part of this study that is unclear to you. You may take as much time as necessary to think this over. At any point in the study, you may question the Principal Investigator, Kristy Forrest about the study (forrestk@merrimack.edu 781-718-9835). In addition, you are free to contact Dr. Russell Mayer, the Institutional Review Board Chair, with any questions (irb@merrimack.edu , 978-837-3499).

Consent: This project has been explained to me to my satisfaction and in language I can understand, and I have received a copy of this consent form. I understand what my participation will involve and I agree to take part in this project under the terms of this agreement. I understand that I am not giving up my legal rights by signing this form.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Investigator/Designee Obtaining Informed Consent

Date

Appendix G

Focus Group Questions for High School Staff

1. What is your title and position?
 2. How long have you been doing this work?
 3. Do you enjoy it?
Yes or no?
If yes, why?
If no, why not?
 4. What do you love most about your work?
 5. What is the biggest obstacle in the way of providing your students with the best education?
 6. What is your biggest challenge in educating high school students?
 7. What do you see are the most effective practices in educating your students?
 8. Do you feel the students are supported?
Yes or no?
If yes, how?
If no, why?
 9. Do you feel staff are supported?
 10. Do you feel staff are equipped to do this work?
 11. What supports are missing or could be improved upon?
 12. What are the best things this high school has going for it now?
 13. What is unique and special about this high school?
 14. What is unique and special about working here at this high school?
-